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CHAPTER VII

MEASURES OF TIME AND SPACE. KAREN ASTRONOMY

The Seasons and the Months

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The seasons in Burma are clearly distinguished, the year being divided into two parts by the monsoon, which is the periodic wind of the Southern Asiatic tropics that for six months, between April and November, blows from the southwest off the Indian Ocean, bringing clouds and moisture which produce the never-failing rainy season, as the Karen name for it, "ta su hka," signifies. In November the monsoon shifts to the opposite quarter and the dry season or "ta yaw hka" follows, being again six months in duration. This latter period is subdivided into the cool season or "ta hkū hka," from the middle of November to the first of February, and the hot season or "ta ko hka," during which the sun is waxing hotter and hotter until the beginning of the rains in May. The rainy season has a fairly even temperature with a mean of about eighty degrees, Fahrenheit, while the dry season is marked by variations ranging from about fifty to over one hundred degrees.

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The Karen term for year is "ni" and for a generation, their longest unit of time, it is "so." Eternity is designated by reduplicating the root "so," for example, "so so," or, with its couplet, "so so xa xa."

According to Karen reckoning, the year is divided into twelve lunar months, a month of twenty-nine days alternating with one of thirty. Thus, they have six months of twenty-nine days each, which total one hundred and seventy-four days, while the six intervening months of thirty days each total one hundred and eighty days. These two totals added together give but three hundred and fifty-four days. This arrangement of the calendar necessitated the addition every three years of an extra or intercalary month to make the reckoning of time correct. But the calendar was so poorly kept that confusion arose, and the people do not agree among themselves as to the proper order of the months, or the beginning of the year, or even as to the correct interpretation of the names of the

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months in all cases.[1] However, the names in the commonly accepted order are as follows:

1. *Th' le*, the searching month, when the villagers hunt for a new village site. It corresponds to the Burmese month, *Pyatho*, and to the moon of January.
2. *Hte kü*, the cutting month, when the Karen cut the jungle preparatory to cultivation. It is equivalent to the Burmese *Tabodwe* and to the moon of February.
3. *Thwe kaw*, the brewing month, when the women prepare the mash for brewing liquor. By some it is said to signify the month of burnings, for at this time they burn over the ground that was cut in the previous month. It is equivalent to the Burmese *Tabaung* and to the moon of March.
4. *La hkli*, the month of yams, because at this season the people were often reduced to the necessity of eating the tubers of the wild yam. It is equivalent to the Burmese *Tagu* and to the moon of April.
5. *De nya*, the lily month, when the wild lilies bloom. Equivalent to *Kasone* of the Burmese and to the moon of May.
6. *La nwi*, the seventh month, corresponds to the Burmese *Nayone* and to the moon of June.[2]
7. *La xo*, the eighth month, is equivalent to the Burmese *Waso* and to the moon of July.
8. *La hkü*, the shut-in month, when it is difficult to go about on account of the heavy rains. It corresponds to the Burmese *Wagaung* and to the moon of August.
9. *Hsi mü*, the month of a little sunshine, when after the heaviest rain there is a little fair weather. It corresponds to the Burmese *Tawthelin* and the moon of September.

[1] *The Karen Recorder*, a vernacular paper published by the Sgaw Karen Mission at Rangoon, printed a long discussion on the order of the months and the significance of their names, which appeared in various numbers from 1915 to 1917. The outcome of the discussion was not at all convincing.

[2] A writer in the Karen *Morning Star* in January, 1918, suggested another meaning for the name of this month, which comes at the opening of the rainy season when, as often happens, there are alternate weeks of sunshine and rain. Karens generally, probably almost without exception, understand the name of this month to refer only to its numerical position in the calendar.

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10. *Hsi hsa*, the month of a little starlight, when the stars begin to show themselves occasionally. It corresponds to the Burmese *Thadingyut* and to the moon of October.

11. *La naw*, the month of the "naw," when from the seeds of this small plant is extracted an oil much like sessimum oil. It is equivalent to the Burmese *Tezaungmon* and to the moon of November.

12. *La plü*, the month of eclipses, when the moon dies and hence the month for funeral ceremonies. It corresponds to the Burmese *Nadaw* and to the moon of December.

It will be noticed that in the list as given above the seventh and eighth months are numbered 6 and 7, respectively. Two suggestions have been made to explain this incongruity. One of these is Dr. Mason's suggestion to the effect that originally the first month was *La plü* (December), which would not only correct the incongruity, but also make the Karen calendar correspond to that of Tibet, which begins with December.[1] The other explanation was given to me by a Karen teacher, who says that the month of *La hkli* (April) is the one that is repeated every three years in order to correct the calendar, and that the periodic interposition of this extra month is responsible for the names of the seventh and eighth months and the disagreement of those names with their serial numbers in the list. To me this explanation seems very dubious. One Karen writer attempts to correct the incongruity between the seventh and eighth months and their serial numbers by proposing to transfer *La hkü* (August) from its generally accepted position in the list to a place before the seventh month, but, of course, this is not a feasible change. As many Karens associate the month for funeral ceremonies *(La plü)* with the end of the year, they do not think it should be shifted into first place in the calendar.

The Days of the Week

Few of the Karen people can tell the days of the week, except according to Burmese or Christian nomenclature. Several old men have given me names for the days, which, they say, were in use a long time ago. There are seven of these, as may be seen in the following tabulation:

[1] *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XXXVII, 62.

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ENGLISH	KAREN	TRANSLATION
Sunday	*Li naw*	The eagle's beak
Monday	*Htaw meh*	The long tooth
Tuesday	*To mü*	The slanting sun
Wednesday	*To kyaw*	The leaning oil tree
Thursday	*Thi thwa*	The big comb
Friday	*Mü daw hpa*	The divided sun day
Saturday	*Mü htaw k' hpu*	The pig's stomach day

I have found no traditions or other information relating to these names.

The Karen divide the day into the following seven parts or subdivisions: (1) *mü hse wah taw*, dawn; (2) *mü heh htaw*, sunrise; (3) *mü heh htaw hpa htaw*, the sun is high; (4) *mü htu*, noon; (5) *mü xe law*, the sun declines; (6) *mü haw law*, evening, and (7) *mü law nü*, sunset. The night also has its divisions, such as *mü yaw ma*, meaning that the sun is deep down; *hpa hpaw mü*, midnight or literally midway between the suns, and *hsaw o*, cock crow or early morning, of which they distinguish three stages. In conversation a Karen indicates the time of day or night by pointing to the sun's position as it was at the time to which he is referring, pointing upward or downward as the occasion requires. More than once in the narration of some story I have heard the different members of a group dispute about the exact angle at which the sun stood when the incident occurred, the difference between the angles indicated being not more than a degree.

MEASUREMENT OF SPACE

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When a Karen speaks of some object, he is likely to indicate its size by comparing it with some part of his person. For example, he will describe a bamboo as being as large around as his arm, or the limb of a tree as being the size of his thigh. Applying the same principle, he has devised a system of rough units of measurement, such as the length of the forefinger, called *t' sü mü*; the distance between the end of the thumb and the end of the forefinger, *t'hpi;* the distance between the end of the thumb and the knuckle of the little finger when the fist is doubled up, *t'so;* the interval between the end of the thumb and the end of the middle finger, *t' hta;* the cubit or the distance from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger, *t' pla*, and the reach of the outstretched arm, *t' hkli*. Inasmuch as

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273 quires the desired strength or percentage of alcohol. Distilled liquor is obtained by boiling the fermented beverage in a closed vessel, from the top of which issues a bamboo pipe that leads to another vessel in which the steam condenses. A more concentrated solution of alcohol is thus secured. On the plains the glutinous rice, which is raised there, is much more commonly used in making liquor than the ordinary grain, because it contains a higher per- [314] centage of sugar. The plains possess another source of intoxicant in the "toddy-palms." (See pp. 105 and 220.) The juice of these palms, which exudes from the cut stems of the fronds, is collected and allowed to ferment, thus producing a liquor that is responsible for much of the crime committed by the rural people of all races.

[462] In former days, in the more backward Karen districts and in Siam, the preparation of drink constituted a considerable part of the work of the women. It was used with every meal and was regarded as a necessary part of the native diet. Large quantities of liquor were provided for every festival. But its use is lessening among the more progressive natives and is rapidly disappearing among the Christian Karens.

276 The use of betel and tobacco is prevalent among the Karen people. Indeed, one might say that it is almost universal among them. The betel-box is always carried on a journey and is ever at hand [574] where work is being done. When the guest arrives, the first act of hospitality is to push the box, replenished with its masticatories, in front of him. Betel, in the estimation of the Karen, forms a part of his food. Small bits of the areca-nut are laid on a fresh green leaf of the piper betel vine; lime is also smeared on the leaf, and perhaps a few cloves or shreds of tobacco leaf are added; the betel leaf is then folded into a wad and put into the mouth. In the process of chewing this "quid" the saliva is turned to a bright red, being secreted in such quantity that frequent expectoration is necessary. Wherever this spittle falls it leaves a red stain. The interior walls of the houses, especially in the corners, and the floors near the cracks are much stained with red. It is not safe to stop under a window or beneath a house, unless one is sure that nobody is within. An early missionary, who traveled with a white pony, was surprised one morning to find his animal wonderfully streaked with red, which yielded only to a vigorous washing. Betel chewing stains the teeth black, though it does not materially injure them, except that the hard usage wears them down or causes them to break off prematurely. Karens often speak of a short space of [805]

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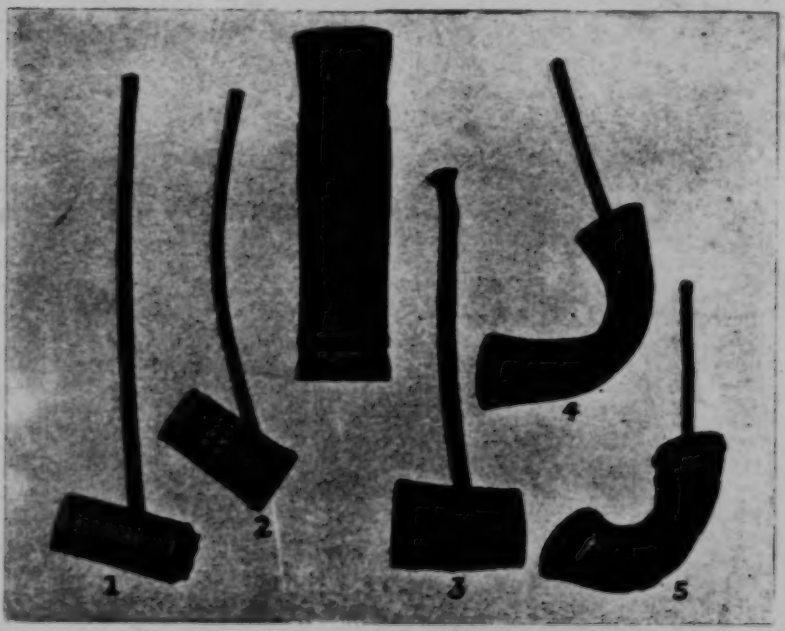
time as being about a betel-chew which, strictly speaking, would mean fifteen or twenty minutes. The women in the hills, instead of chewing the quid, allow it to remain on the tongue and mull it for hours at a time, much to the annoyance of any one trying to follow them in their conversation, which they keep up meantime.

The areca-nut is cut up with a kind of scissors or a sickle. Some use a section of deer's horn about six inches long in breaking



KAREN TOBACCO PIPES AND A PISTON FOR BREAKING BETEL-NUT
Nos. 1 and 2 are sections of bamboo decorated with etched designs; Nos. 3 and 4 have monkey-bone stems, and No. 5 is a bamboo root decorated with silver bead-work.

up these nuts. The horn is perforated by a hole large enough at one end to admit a whole nut, but considerably smaller at the other end. In being driven through this orifice the nut is broken into bits, which issue from the smaller opening. This nut-breaker is not used as much now as formerly. The areca-nuts and other supplies for betel chewing are kept in the ever present betel-box, which in the hills may be nothing more than an end of bamboo or, among those having due regard for the social amenities connected with the practice, is likely to be a round laquer receptacle or, in rare in-

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no reference to the object of the call. This whole procedure illustrates not only a Karen, but also an Oriental, trait of character. The Oriental deals in indirect methods, rather than run the risk of saying something disagreeable. 584

Realizing that his mission is not in vain, the intermediary enters the house of the prospective bride's parents in joyous mood, fairly shouting the Karen version of "tra-la-la," which is "traw-le, wa-le, ho-o-o." They sit down and discuss the matter. Then the parents kill a fowl or a pig, and the guest stays for dinner in token that the bargain is sealed. After the date for the wedding-feast has been set, the intermediary returns to the young man's family and reports his success. As a rule the time of the feast is fixed by the maiden's parents, but it is sometimes determined by the youth's family.

The only month that is tabu for wedding-feasts is "La plü" (December). This is the month when the moon is most often eclipsed (swallowed by the dogs). To many the month seems as though it were killed and is, therefore, regarded as inauspicious for new life. Others say that it is the month when neither birds nor animals mate, and that it is unwise for men to undertake to start a new household. The favorite months for marriages are March and April in the dry season, because the harvest is past, the weather is good, and there is plenty to eat and drink. The date of the wedding must fall during the waxing of the moon, which augurs an increasing family. This important point being settled, the prospective bride busies herself less with the preparation of her own trousseau than with the weaving of a set of new garments for her future husband, including a white turban, a white blanket with a red stripe running through it lengthwise, and, in the olden days, a "hse plo" or single smock. The maiden's family prepare the rice, fish-paste, pork, and liquor for the feast. The prospective groom has only to make for himself a horn to be blown at the festivities. On the plains and in those places in the hills where each family has its separate house, a booth or "k'la pyeh" is built close at hand for the wedding-feasts.[4] This structure must be so placed as to have its entrance towards the tail of the "p'yo" or great dragon of the Karens. Not long ago I saw such a booth, which was enclosed on three sides and had a small open entrance to the east. The south side was entirely open. Access to the structure was had

585 787 805 292 534 585 343

[4] This booth is often called a "mandat." The name, "k'la pyeh," is from the Burmese. Perhaps the booth itself is of Burmese origin, but I do not know.

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777 A number of tabus are associated with signs of bad luck. Many of these signs are incidental to going on journeys. For example, if one sneezes on rising to start on a journey, or on the way hears the cry of a barking deer, or sees one of these animals or a snake crossing his path, or hears of somebody's death, or sees a civet-cat near his path, he must give up his excursion until another day. Otherwise, he will meet with an accident, fall sick, or experience some misfortune in his family. It was once the custom of those who were setting out on a trading journey to repeat the following words:

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"I am going to———— to trade.
O Snakes, do not cross my path.
O Barking-deer and Rabbits, do not hinder me.
I am going across my land and along my path.
There are many other paths on the earth.
O white Civet-cat, do not hinder me."

If divination shows that one's illness is due to having taken the wrong road on a recent journey, that road rests under a tabu for a period of from four to seven days. The branch of a tree is laid across the forbidden trail where it leaves the main path, and no one will enter it until the tabu is lifted. This is called the tabu of the road ("ta dü kleh"). When a death occurs in a village, the death tabu ("ta dü ta thi ta pgha") is observed until the burial ceremonies are over. Children and persons of weak constitution are kept from witnessing the removal of a corpse from the village, inasmuch as their "k'las" are said to be easily enticed away by that of the dead person. On an elephant hunt it is forbidden to mention the name of the beast, lest its spirit should hear and take alarm, thus destroying the chance of success in the chase. Instead it is called "ta hpa do" or "the great one." Other signs of ill luck surely bring their tabus. If one does not return from work on hearing the wildcat's cry, one will die. No one should live in a house whose owner dies, or by which a green pigeon flew while the house was building.

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241 The observance of certain tabus are regarded as conducive to the production of good crops or of prosperity in other forms. When the people have made the offering, "theh a hku," they must refrain from going into their fields for seven days. Otherwise, the demons will follow them and spoil their crops. This tabu is known as "ta dü hkü ta dü theh." During the dark and the full of the moon, in February and July, respectively, when people say that "it is hot," meaning that conditions are unfavorable, they avoid work for

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